

TITLE: The Predicament of the Terrorism Analyst

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Hercules versus the Hydra

THE PREDICAMENT OF THE TERRORISM ANALYST

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The second labor enjoined on Hercules by King Eurystheus was to slay the Argossian Hydra, a nine-headed dragon that terrorized the countryside. Despite his massive strength and skill with arms, the demigod found this no mean task: whenever he managed to strike off one of the monster's rapidly moving heads, the Hydra grew two in its place. Nearly exhausted, Hercules finally overcame his foe by using a torch to burn away all but the one head which was immortal. This still living head he buried deep in the ground.

The challenge facing intelligence officers seeking to analyze terrorism is not unlike the one Hercules had to confront.¹ As a phenomenon, terrorism is hard to define in a fashion that permits analysts to divide their labor and focus their efforts efficiently. As intelligence targets, terrorist groups offer poor and very sparse grist for the analytic mill. Like the Hydra, terrorist groups are in a constant state of transformation: once the analyst thinks he has mastered one group, it vanishes, and two others have appeared in its place. And, to make matters even more complex, the concerns as well as conceptions of the policy consumers of terrorism intelligence are particularly prone to complicating the manner in which analysts of the subject do their jobs.

In fairness, terrorism is relatively new as a priority topic for the intelligence community—one that until the mid-1970s was commonly regarded as largely the province of either researchers in abnormal psychology or the handful of Central Intelligence Agency operations officers who had been dragooned into police liaison duties. In spite of the increasing rate and intensity of attacks against US and other Western targets during the 1970s, the situation changed very slowly. By 1980, for example, CIA was among the few US intelligence agencies to have a distinct unit devoted—at least half of it was devoted—to in-depth analysis of terrorism, and this small group of analysts initially spent much of its time compiling a historical chronology of terrorist incidents and attempting to discern and draw inferences from past trends in terrorism. The intelligence community regarded terrorism as a low priority issue and, in consequence, a good deal of its analysis of terrorism, while valuable in understanding the history of the phenomenon, had limited relevance either to the problem at hand or to the needs of policymakers and field officers who were trying to deal with it.

Things began to change very rapidly thereafter, in large part because of pressure from a new administration more sensitized to terrorism than its predecessor, from incoming DCI William Casey, and from a growing number of

¹ Officers engaged in collection and special operations, of course, face a similar challenge. Indeed, one could argue that much of the US Government's current frustration with its inability to combat terrorism flows from a feeling of futility in the face of an enemy which is so difficult to engage and contain.

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operations officers and analysts who were dismayed by the successes the purveyors of terror seemed to be enjoying. By 1983 when President Reagan was preparing to sign NSDD 138, "Combatting Terrorism," CIA's analytic effort had risen to more (b)(3)(c) terrorism analysts and support personnel along with an equal number of regional political and military analysts who were spending some of their time on terrorist issues; in the community at large, there remained virtually no intelligence agency or component that did not have at least a small terrorism analysis section. Collection efforts and related field activities had also grown apace.

As the commitment and resources dedicated to the task of analyzing the terrorist threat have grown, so too has the frustration. What is now nearly a decade of concentrated analytic activity at CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and numerous other military and civilian agencies has yet to yield any of the kind of breakthroughs that have become commonplace on other analytic issues ranging from denied area oil supplies and agricultural production to ICBM deployment and the Kremlin succession. Terrorism analysis sports no nifty methodology or forward looking predictive techniques. Despite some of the best efforts of the community, terrorism analysts remain—as were their predecessors in the 1970s—best able to explain what happened as opposed to what might happen and how it might be countered. Good intentions aside, our analysis is still far from supporting adequately a pro-active counterterrorism program.

Why is this still so, and can—or should—we expect better?

The Definitional Morass

The first problem confronting any analyst is a fundamental one: defining the nature and bounds of the phenomenon he is trying to analyze. In the case of terrorism, this is no easy chore; if it were, virtually every book or treatise written on the subject over the past 20 years would not begin with a chapter on definitions. The fact is that like pornography, terrorism means different things to different people. According to the US Code (the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, for example), any violent political act abroad that would be considered a crime if committed in the United States meets the criteria. Some authors like Ray Cline and Claire Sterling, who are concerned with the growth of Soviet-sponsored subversive activities around the world, choose to view insurgent and guerrilla operations as well as support activities like smuggling and gun running as part and parcel of the terrorism problem. Conversely, other students of the phenomenon—like Walter Laqueur, Brian Jenkins, and Martha Crenshaw—tend to favor narrower constructions, specifying the need for civilian victims, a demonstration effect, and the like. By and large, most of these definitions are neither right nor wrong: rather they tend to reflect the value judgments, professional backgrounds, and world views of their proponents.

Many policymakers have an insatiable appetite for statistics about international terrorism. They want to know the "who-what-where-when," of course, but especially the elusive and elastic "how many"—and "was that more or fewer than before." To answer such questions, the CIA maintains a terrorist incident data base. Since the data base serves a large body of consumers who do not agree on exactly what terrorism is, the Agency has adopted a rather ungainly but

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determinedly middle-of-the-road definition, one that includes the bulk of what most people think is terrorism while excluding the marginal and the controversial:

“Terrorism is premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatants by subnational groups or clandestine state agents, usually to impress or intimidate a target audience.”

The need to make our data base reliable—that is, consistent over time no matter who is feeding it—has led the CIA framers to sacrifice elegance for explicitness. That is what is wrong with even this definition as well as with some of the alternatives. Terrorism is not really so easily or neatly bounded. To be sure, such a definition can identify perhaps six or seven of the terrorist Hydra’s heads (and, to its credit, they are all Hydra heads and not, say, Griffin heads), but inevitably it will miss a few in the back. For example, as any Libya watcher will argue, the Qadhafi regime’s lamentably routine assassination of a “stray dog” (a dissident Libyan emigre) does not differ in any essential way from the incident last year in which an official inside the Libyan People’s Bureau in London shot at the crowd demonstrating out in front, killing a British policewoman. Yet under a rigorous application of the CIA’s definition, the first incident is terrorism, the second probably not.

But a vaguer definition is no solution. That merely leads Hercules to dissipate his strength flailing away at Griffins and Orcs and other mythical animals when he ought to be concentrating on the Hydra. Not all violence is political; and not all political violence is terrorism. Not everything a guerrilla

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does (even a communist guerrilla) is terrorism; indeed, not everything a terrorist does is terrorism. A failure to establish and abide by distinctions between terrorism and other forms of subversion or societal violence results in the creation of an analytical amoeba that won't hold its shape long enough for anybody to analyze it.

Part of the reason for the problem is that terrorism is not a monolithic movement but instead a tactic, and a tactic that any group can use to further its objectives. The practitioners of terrorism vary from region to region and issue to issue. In Western Europe, terrorism tends to come either from small radical, often anarchistic groups like Action Directe in France and the Red Army Faction in West Germany or else from larger, intensely nationalistic separatist or irredentist movements like the Basques in Spain or the Provos in Ireland. In the Middle East, terrorism proceeds on a far grander scale, one that is colored strongly by the zealotry of Shiism and the religious animosity of Palestinian for Israeli, all fueled by a heavy dose of state support from countries like Iran and Syria and by the continual internecine strife within the Palestinian movement itself. In Latin America, Asia, and Africa, terrorism is frequently hard to distinguish from banditry and the perennial social violence of less developed states. It occurs most often as an outgrowth of insurgency, with a group adopting terrorism as a temporary tactic until it gains enough momentum to challenge the regime militarily. Around the world, a few groups—notably the Armenian ASALA and Justice Commandos—seem motivated not by politics or economics but rather by the spirit of vendetta which drives them to take vengeance on some historic antagonist wherever they might find him. Most of these users of terrorism have little in common save their tactics. Some are independent states like Libya, others are cells of fewer than a dozen sociopathic bomb throwers. Some come from the Right, some come from the Left, and some cannot articulate a coherent political philosophy much less a feasible agenda for political change. For most groups, terrorism is but one arrow in their quivers; for perhaps a score of groups, terrorism is about all they do. Many terrorists are no more than low-grade criminals, but a few are near-geniuses with advanced degrees from the best universities.

All this contributes to the difficulty of analyzing terrorism. First, rather than being able to focus on a single, discrete phenomenon, terrorism analysts need to master not only the particular operating styles of the groups which they are studying but also the regional political, military, and social contexts in which those operations take place. The analyst of Palestinian terrorism, for example, needs to know as much about Israel, Syria, and Jordan as he does about Fatah and the Abu Nidal Group—and this poses a considerable burden in terms of training to be taken, mail to be read, and counterparts to be consulted. It also means that it takes a long time to “grow” a good terrorism analyst. Second, terrorism analysts face a special dilemma: if they define their subject too narrowly, they risk being left with little finished intelligence to write or brief that is relevant to policy concerns. But as they define their subject more broadly, they will intrude upon the turf of regional political and military analysts where they are often not welcome. This, then, is the boundary problem.

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The Data Desert

Even when a community agency manages to recruit and develop a competent terrorism analyst and to define a clearly bounded area for him to analyze and report, that analyst often runs headfirst into a wasteland marked by the near absence of relevant data, for terrorist groups leave few tracks. A Soviet analyst, for example, may frequently bemoan how little data there are to support his judgments, but he is in far better shape than his terrorism counterpart. The Soviet specialist knows precisely where the USSR is and he knows in some detail: the disposition of most Soviet forces;

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The terrorism analyst is less fortunate. Terrorist groups are among the hardest targets for intelligence collection and, hence, for analysis.

- Most terrorist groups are small. Though terrorist groups sometimes possess sizable bodies of supporters and sympathizers, their actual membership—that is, the people who throw the bombs and shoot the Skorpions—

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- These small terrorist groups tend to be tightly knit and politically and ethnically homogeneous. In Europe, for example, the leadership and fighting cadres of the most troublesome of the leftwing anarchistic groups like the Red Army Faction in Germany, the CCC in Belgium, Action Directe in France, and the Red Brigades in Italy are, generally speaking, individuals of similar backgrounds with intellectual and sometimes personal ties that go back to the student anti-war protests of the 1960s. In the Middle East, the anti-US terrorist groups doing the most damage are manned by individuals from the same religious sect, often the same village, and occasionally even the same family. These are individuals who have known each other very well for a long time.

- The operational life of the typical terrorist group is usually short, (b)(1) The RAF in Germany, which has operated in one form or another since the early 1970s for instance, is a model of the longevity few other groups experience. More commonly a group will rise to prominence with a few nasty attacks

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one year, only to vanish from our scopes by the next. Several years later, an organization with the same sobriquet and grievances might again appear—but typically with different members and sometimes with a new modus operandi. Except for a handful of leaders—Abu Nidal, Carlos, and Abu Ibrahim, to name three—the typical terrorist's business life is similarly brief. Various studies done of European terrorists, for example, have indicated that affiliation with a terrorist group—whether terminated by death, arrest, or boredom—is usually a matter of a few years.

- Terrorist groups seldom operate from fixed facilities. They train in attics, basements, and hotel rooms. Their training is rudimentary. Few active terrorists benefit even from the kind of paramilitary instruction the USSR and other bloc countries offer to Third World insurgent groups with the proper ideological credentials. Moreover, terrorists communicate mainly by word of mouth, by courier, or by commercial telephone. Seldom do they use the kind of sophisticated electronic devices available to a diplomatic service or an army in the field. Their equipment and munitions are typically either stolen from host military and police stores or purchased on the "grey market." Even their bombs usually consist of components that could be easily procured at a US hardware store or stolen from a commercial construction company.²

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Open source material is often helpful, but it is usually out of date and sometimes full of errors. Consequently, our major source of data on terrorist groups is HUMINT, and even that is spotty.

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In other words, the terrorism analyst usually suffers from a terrible paucity of reliable and timely data about the group he is studying. Most of the information he does have has come from a single kind of source—HUMINT

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—and is not readily subject to confirmation or even much

² One senior CIA analyst refers to these as "Hechinger bombs." There is little question among bomb experts, however, that the quantum advances in electronic technology over the past two decades—most of which are available to the civilian market either directly or with minimum subterfuge—are leading to increasing sophistication in terrorist explosives capabilities. Fortunately, such improvised devices (especially the complicated ones) often fail to detonate—or else detonate prematurely, taking out the terrorist instead of his target.

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more than the most coarse credibility checks. If the terrorist group is a new one, as so many are, it will also lack the kind of track record that the analyst could use to help project the group's future activities. Thus, the terrorism analyst will seldom have the opportunity to do what a "headquarters analyst" is supposed to do: provide an integrated all-source and empirically grounded perspective on what is going on and what it means. Instead he often becomes no more than a current intelligence reporter, who adds a bit of political and military context to the generally meager substance of incoming cable traffic and then passes it on to the policy consumer, with luck ahead of the media.

Even in this role, the intelligence officer analyzing terrorism is often at a disadvantage to a newspaper or magazine reporter. Unlike the journalist, the terrorism analyst cannot cultivate or interview his own sources but must make do with what the field collector sends and reports officers disseminates.

The information most demanded of a terrorism analyst is where the terrorist will strike next. Alas, the terrorism analyst rarely can make such a prediction because he so often lacks the information—both past and present—about his target.³ Furthermore, terrorists tend to select the path of least resistance, and attack the target of greatest opportunity. Theirs is the initiative: they can strike when they like and how they like at whom they like. If, as a consequence of an analyst's or field officer's warning, the US Embassy is too well guarded, they can attack the bi-national center instead. Absent a specific accurate report from an unusually well-placed source or a fortuitous snippet of COMINT, the best a terrorism analyst usually can do is characterize the threat environment in a given location.

Many of these liabilities do not apply as strongly to analysis of state-sponsored terrorism. When a state is involved, we can bring into play a broader assortment of collection systems because the target is known and fixed. Even so, countries like Iran, Syria, and Libya are denied areas for US information collectors, and liaison relationships are out of the question. (b)(3)(n)

Moreover, terrorist groups affiliated with these countries—such as Hizballah is with Iran—tend to operate semi-autonomously and the linkages and responsibility are deliberately blurred. Indeed this is one of the reasons states use terrorist groups as surrogates. In consequence, the landscape for information on state supported terrorism is often a barren one as well.

Policy Complication

One advantage intelligence analysts often have when dealing with consumers of their product is that the preponderance of substantive expertise lies on their side. Terrorism is a painful exception. The consumer—whether a policymaker in Washington or a general, ambassador, or chief of station in the field—typically thinks he knows as much as the analyst about the nature of the threat. Indeed, sometimes he does because of the data problem described above,

³ Sam Adams, the Vietnam order-of-battle specialist, when asked by an interviewer about what made a good analyst, replied, "Good files." This of course is exactly what the terrorism analyst has usually lacked.

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but often this understanding has been shaped by preconceptions of who the terrorist is and what he does.

Specifically the term terrorism has increasingly become degraded through misuse and overuse by the media and the public at large and is now little more than a pejorative expression denoting almost any sort of illegitimate violence committed by objectional persons in pursuit of unacceptable ends. Consequently, in the popular mind, the Soviets, Cubans, North Koreans, Sandanistas, and PLO—along with, of course, Carlos, Arafat, Abu Nidal and their ilk—are all terrorists or state supporters of terrorism. Similarly, the “Contras,” the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, and Israeli commandos are freedom fighters—albeit ones whose bombs may have occasionally gone off in ill-advised places. Iran, Syria, Libya, and the communist bloc are the major purveyors of terrorism; the United States, Great Britain, Israel, and France support the maintenance of democracy and law and order around the world. While this might make for good—and not necessarily incorrect—political rhetoric, it obscures the fact that terrorist tactics are used by many groups and countries for a broad range of purposes. Worse, it limits the ability of the analyst to communicate with his audience on many aspects of this complex problem or to supply analysis that supports decisionmaking rather than ex post facto justifications of policies.

Virtually all of the states, groups, and individuals mentioned above have at one time or another either committed or supported another party who committed an act that meets our definition of what terrorism is. The differences among them—and these are substantial—are a matter of intent and frequency rather than of style. Certainly, neither the United States nor Great Britain—nor for that matter France or Israel—supports the use of terrorism as a tool of state policy or condones its use by allied countries or friendly groups. The same cannot be said for the others, but even among these “bad guys” the degrees of use of terrorism and the motivations for doing so vary considerably. In short, not every violent act of a country or group hostile to the United States or our allies is an act of terrorism, and not all acts of terrorism are committed by terrorists.

Every year, collectors and analysts spend thousands of hours trying to divine the nature and extent of Soviet (or Nicaraguan or Cuban or North Korean—feel free to insert the name of your favorite hostile state) involvement in terrorism. And quite often, the answer comes up something like the following: “Though the Soviets (or whoever) support leftwing revolutionary groups with arms and training, there is little or no evidence to indicate they actively direct or participate in international terrorist acts against the United States or its NATO allies.” Frequently, the consumer is not pleased with this answer. What he wanted was not analysis but rather evidence to confirm his conviction that a particular malefactor is, along with his other crimes, also engaged in terrorism. When no such evidence is found or when the evidence indicates only limited or fringe involvement, the consumer may reject the analyst’s conclusions or assume that the collectors have just not looked hard enough.

A similar mechanism causes many consumers to worry about “high-tech” terrorism as well as “narcoterrorism”—essentially nonexistent phenomena that are often discussed as if they were real or, at any rate, right around the corner.

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Because terrorists are, by definition, bad, it is obviously just a matter of time before they either acquire the ultimate means of destruction or else join forces with narcotics traffickers—or so this train of seductive reasoning usually goes.

None of this is to suggest that the Soviets are never involved in terrorism—at the minimum, they certainly complicate the problem in a variety of ways and do occasionally attempt to manipulate groups where it meets their tactical ends—or that some day or somewhere a terrorist group might not get hold of a fissionable or fusionable device or else deal in illicit drugs. Though analysts and collectors need to keep closely attuned to any possible new development on all three scores, these issues are not at the core of what most modern terrorism is all about. Trying to produce intelligence on something that is, generally speaking, not there simply diverts resources away from production that might help policymakers get a little closer to understanding and solving the current terrorism problem. Moreover, the assumption that terrorism is something only evil people do not only cramps the analysis but limits the receptiveness of consumers to information about occasional “pro-Western” violence which can serve as a catalyst—or at least a pretext—for an anti-Western terrorist response. Like any other kind of good analyst, the terrorism analyst must avoid value judgments in selecting his data and making his assessments: he needs to be able to tell the story straight, and then let the policymaker decide what the next step should be. To the extent the word “terrorism” takes on a politicized connotation, this becomes an increasingly difficult and frustrating task for the analyst.

Where Next?

There are no simple solutions to the difficulties terrorism intelligence analysts face, although a better understanding by consumers and senior intelligence managers of the basic problems associated with this issue would go a long way to easing the analysts' frustration. In particular, a few final points seem pertinent.

First, the role of headquarters analysis in counterterrorism will often be rather limited because of the highly tactical nature of the problem. The principal counterterrorism objective of the United States Government is to cause the terrorist to cease and desist from acts that might harm US citizens or interests. Failing this, the government wants to take action to cause the attack to fail or warn the target before damage is done. Given the rapidly shifting nature of the terrorist target, intelligence analysis that supports these goals will most often have to be situationally relevant, very specific, and rapidly delivered. By the same token, however, the analyst will be hard pressed to supply much information that the clandestine collector cannot provide. Not even elegant artificial intelligence programs or state of the art methodologies will answer most of the basic questions that are central to putting terrorists out of business if the data to make these work are absent or cannot be gathered in time. In the case of terrorism intelligence, the target often does not stay stuck long enough or assume sufficiently high visibility to permit collection from multiple sources over an extended period of time and the analyst will frequently not be in a position to provide the kind of unique contribution which he can in other issue areas. In many instances, too, the main role of the collector and analyst will amount

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simply to finding out where the terrorist is so that the authorities can take direct action.⁴

Second, the terrorism analyst and the terrorism intelligence collector must work exceptionally closely with one another. Raw intelligence collection on terrorism gets stale fast, tends to be gathered in fragments, and is difficult to report formally. If analysts and human source collectors do not interact daily to share information, the analyst will be skunked. Over the past two years at CIA, increasing progress has been made by putting these two different breeds of intelligence officers in close proximity to one another—and the arrangement is working well and must continue.

Third, the community must avoid defining the terrorism problem so narrowly as to include only the technical elements of a typical terrorist's modus operandi or, conversely, so broadly as to include practically any type of political and social violence. In the former case, there is little opportunity for the terrorism analyst to make a contribution to the policy process. In the latter, his contribution will be neither unique nor welcomed by the larger corps of regional analysts, on whose toes he will be stepping. Terrorism analysts, to be the most effective, need to live somewhere in the middle, able simultaneously to understand the peculiar style of terrorist group operations and to assess those operations in their proper sociopolitical and security contexts.

Fourth, we must be realistic about the terrorism problem itself. Our fervent concern to do something to make the terrorist threat abate must not lead professional intelligence officers to confuse activity with productivity. Much of the terrorism that occurs around the world is little more than low grade criminal activity, albeit with political ramifications. We must recognize that much of it represents only a marginal threat to the United States. There is going to be very little US policymakers can do about it in many cases. What is more, a good deal of terrorist activity is simply not going to be susceptible to intelligence collection and analysis an ocean or two away. Terrorism analysts can make their most useful contributions on transnational terrorist groups and on state-supported terrorism: issues where either the targets are a bit more stable or where the United States can often exercise diplomatic, military, or law enforcement leverage. They can also play a key role in helping US policymakers understand the extent to which other countries might cooperate with us to combat terrorism. But, for example, considering that the West German police and security services—with their relatively enormous investment in counterterrorism programs—cannot get a handle on their indigenous terrorists, it is unrealistic to expect the United States in many locations abroad to do much more than understand the nature of the threat and increase the security around its facilities and personnel accordingly. Moreover, though headquarters analysis can often provide a useful perspective on the terrorist threat environment at a particular post, it cannot substitute in tactical security situations for the observations and

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judgment of professionals on the scene (some of whom, incidentally, might be—or ought to be—analysts assigned there). In any case, what the people in the field do not need is a restatement of the problem they had already reported to headquarters.

Most of the points made above are neither new nor profound, but they probably need to be restated periodically. Both consumers and managers of intelligence should keep in mind that analysis of terrorist groups and activities is often different from most other types of analysis the intelligence community does. Not only is the terrorism analyst usually under greater time pressure, but his information resources are leaner and his objectives often more limited and tactical in nature. Above all, like the military analyst covering a shooting war in which the United States is engaged, the terrorism analyst can frequently measure his contribution in very immediate terms and a very concrete currency—lives saved or, unfortunately, lost.

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